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THE PLAY OF MAN.*

(A Review.)

By R. A. P.

The earnest student of psychology when reading the various works which attempt to dissect the human character must sometimes feel that everything has been accounted for except the impish element. We read of affections, and desires, and appetites, of reason, will, conscience or imagination, but they none of them quite account for the love of mischief, quite apart from sin, and the sense of comicality, quite apart from obvious stimulus. At any age from six months to four score years and ten, man is apt to be unaccountable, freakish, for a new element suddenly presents itself in his character—the playful. A book recently published by the professor of philosophy at Basel, Herr Karl Groos, has for the first time treated this propensity with seriousness, and considered it as part of the natural man. And because once an idea is in the world it seems as if it were everywhere in the air, we have also Professor Sully's *Essay on Laughter* to direct our thoughts seriously to a subject not generally considered grave. Yet parents and teachers know from experience what gravity it possesses. What amuses the child or man is a very good test of the innate character, and while enjoying the sound of children's merry laughter it is just as well to ascertain its cause. Herr Groos subdivides "Play" into two categories, "Playful Experimentation" and "The Playful Exercise of Impulses." It is always wise to start with a definition, so we are told "when an act is performed solely because of the pleasure it affords there is play." Children are our born players and play-fellows, because being blessed with a surplus of activity many more acts can be by them pleasurably performed. Children to whom the world is new are born experimentors—does not the baby eat the coal if he possibly can? Newly come

* *The Play of Man*, Karl Groos. Published by Heinemann, 1901; translated by E. A. Baldwin.

to the possession of his five senses, what a delightful game it is to taste, handle, see and hear. A child's earliest game is perhaps "Peep-Bo," playful experimentation with sight! But as the child grows older and more active he has other powers with which to experiment; he dances, he runs, he jumps, he climbs—often to the horror and dismay of his careful guardians, taking pleasure in the playful use of his bodily powers. He also picks his toys to pieces, for destruction and construction may both be pleasurable activities! All the hoops and tops and balls and skipping ropes owe their existence to the delight men find in exercising their strength and agility. But the mind as well as the body shares in this playful "experimentation." Everyone knows the game when hands, feet or eyes have to be guessed, while the rest of the figure is shrouded in a sheet—here "recognition" is the mind force brought pleasurably into use. Another game when many objects seen for a few minutes have to be afterwards described exercises "attention," and so on. Another curious use which human beings make of their own minds is the way in which they experiment with their feelings—a process by no means confined to childhood. The immortal Fat Boy in "Pickwick" who said, "I wants to make your flesh creep," was only appealing to that playful instinct which *enjoys* being terrified, provided it is quite understood that it is all play! Bogies, Boggles, Bug-a-boos owe their origin to this playful dread of "all the wicked shadows coming tramp, tramp, tramp," When one comes across some poor dear shrinking little soul who has been genuinely scared, not in the least understanding the rest of the world's attitude to its own creations, what a delight it is to initiate this idea that it is all "play." A child will understand that far better than being told that it is all nonsense and moonshine in a very grown-up and superior manner. *That* only drives it into silence and underground terrors more deadly than before. Many other examples are given by Herr Groos of experiments with surprise, suffering, will force, etc., to which doubtless we could each add from our own experience.

But these experiments all seem to point to consciousness and a certain deliberate seeking after pleasure; in the second category of playful impulses the springs are deeper and more hidden. The love of teasing, practical jokes, etc., are often

indulged to others' detriment with genuine "thoughtlessness." From the higher flights of satire through caricatures down to the schoolboy's "booby-trap," one impulse, says the author, dictates them all—the fighting impulse—for the object of all is to provoke opposition for the love of meeting it!

Then there is the enjoyment of the comic and incongruous which is here traced to two causes—a feeling of superiority or the recoil of contradiction from previous "inner imitation."

Imitation is at the root of so much play and so many games, especially in very young children, who will delight in telling you that they have done or can do all they have seen performed by their elders; not from an innate wicked propensity to lie, but as a delightful piece of self-deception! It is just as well to take the delight out of the self-deception, but to treat the child as a deliberate liar and to talk large of punishment immediate or to come is to ignore man's playful impulses altogether.

Lastly, social impulses are considered as a cause of play, and Professor Groos discusses seriously how much "social" life benefits a child—certainly for holidays he considers it indispensable. "Holidays spent in simple playful indulgence of the gregarious instinct are of the greatest value for the collective social life of mankind." He remarks upon the wonderful obedience voluntarily shown by a child to the leader in some game, and the *esprit de corps* which little harmless plots and games shared together promote in young people—"an illustration in miniature of the influence of war on the evolution of society."

Then in his conclusion the writer considers the place of play in education. "Instruction may take the form of playful activity, or on the other hand play may be converted into systematic teaching." The standing example of the first is the teaching of Froebel with its games and gifts. We acknowledge the debt modern education owes to him, but we are also aware of the danger of emasculating a child's mind by relying only on its playful impulses and not on its higher powers. As an example of the second we have the solemn compulsory cricket and football of the public schools—the element of "play" is often one fears eliminated and the game becomes a very serious business indeed, ending in the production of those "flannelled fools and muddied oafs" whom

we are beginning to resent. But there is a connecting link between man's serious and playful pursuits—namely, his "occupations" in the form of tastes and hobbies. It is not too much to say that the best education is that which has opened the way to the greatest number of relationships, some of them begun playfully, between the man and the world of nature, art, humanity and Divinity.

Another point considered in *The Play of Man* is how far the teacher and parent should mingle in games which to them may not be "play," if he or she is unfortunate enough to no longer find pleasure in them. "It is unnatural and unfortunate to leave children," says Professor Groos, "wholly to their own devices." Even animals teach their young how to play—and it is the function of the grown-up to direct the play towards the good and useful—self-activity, imitation of what is grand and good, and true sociability. So much does this book teach us of the use and meaning of play, that we must agree with one of its concluding sentences—"Play reveals the breadth or limitation of a child's horizon, the independence of his character, or his need of support and direction."